Gargoyles and Grotesques

DAVID ALSTON

"Beautiful city ! so venerable, so lovely, so unravaged by the fierce intellectual life of our century, so serene ! Her ineffable charm keeps ever calling to us, to the true goal of all of us, to the ideal, to perfection". The words of Matthew Arnold dance in the tired mind of Thomas Hardy's scholar-stonemason, Jude Fawley — Jude the Obscure — on his first night in the hallowed city of Christminster, the Oxford on the confines of Hardy's Wessex. On that first night in the gathering dusk and darkness, Jude had rambled by the walls and doorways "feeling with his fingers the contours of their moulding and carving". In narrow alleys, he came across "porticos, oriels, doorways of enriched and florid middle-ages design, their extinct air being accentuated by the rottenness of the stones". The stones of the city conjure up spectres of a glorious past, but in the daylight, Jude found that "the perfect and ideal gave way to the more or less defective real", as it does throughout the novel. The stone, however, continued to speak its special language to Jude, not one of architectural orders, Ionic or Corinthian, but the corbels, cornices and lintels spoke instead of fellow artisans. They told of "the dead handicraftsmen, whose muscles had actually executed those forms". Jude was "one who knew their beginning, could tell whether they were difficult or easy in the working, had taken little or much time, were trying to the arm or convenient to the tool". So strong are his impressions that several of the crumbling buildings appear to him as "maimed sentient beings" locked in their deadly struggle against years weather and man.

Later, standing in a stonemason's yard, seeking employment, surrounded by the new traceries, mullions, transoms and shafts, Judes sees a centre of effort equal to any of the achievements of scholarship. But his "old idea" makes short shrift of this "true illumination". Hardy himself was the son and grandson of master stonemasons. However, his knowledge of the stones of Oxford would appear to have been largely the product of his imagination. He seems hardly to have spent any length of time in the city other than during the period immediately prior to the writing of 'Jude the Obscure', a fact of some significance in the story of his life. And yet, from the position of omniscient author, Hardy can make a point which inevitably could not be grasped by Jude given the lowly vantage-point of a shifting journeyman's life: "medievalism was as dead as a fern leaf in a lump of coal . . . other developments were shaping in the world around Jude, in which Gothic architecture and its associations had no place."

Jude's Christminster companions in those first months were not of flesh and blood, "but the saints and prophets in the window tracery, the paintings in the galleries, the statues, the busts, the gargoyles, the corbel-heads." For these, he felt a true bond, that of continuity with the past: they seemed to breathe his atmosphere. "Like all newcomers to a spot on which the past is deeply graven, he heard the past announcing itself with an emphasis altogether unsuspected by and even incredible to the habitual residents." And yet, whilst he felt that only a wall separated him from his gentlemen peers and the life of study and learned discourse, the irony of Jude's craft involves him in physically renovating the masonry destined for ever to exclude him; leading him eventually to his dejected and pathetic impulse: "he took from his pocket the lump of chalk which as a workman he usually carried there and wrote along the wall "I have understanding as well as you. I am not inferior to you, yea who knoweth not such things as these ! (Job Ch. XII V.3)".

Impassive, sententious, or cackling with glee at human foibles — be it Jude's, or the Dons' of his day, or our own vagaries of the present — safe from where they are perched, like bats under the eaves, are the gargoyles of Oxford. Wherever you go about the quadrangles, beaming down on you with little benevolence and a good deal of mischief, are gaggles of petrified miniature terribilità, scorn and ribaldry. Even the jocular hold their smiles with the fixed mien of comic masks, and as in the Greek convention, find themselves in uncomfortable proximity to images of foreboding anger, or despairing woe. They have been pulling their faces for hundreds of years, receiving, it is true, skilled facelifts from time to time, for they at least are not fossils, leaves in coal, but have been fashioned and refashioned in a continuous tradition stretching back to the late Middle Ages. It is a living tradition, though a perished gargoyle such as one on the facade of Pembroke, a simian, empty stare, pitted and as if worm-eaten, seems a singular image of 'vanitas' and the brevity of human life.

Spick and span on the facade of Magdalen College are the newest, and it is with these that one wants to begin. This may seem a little strange. The interest, not to say veneration of such art or artisanal objects might usually be thought to be directly proportional to their age. It is hard to think of another instance where the suggestion could be made that modern replicas might well be worth viewing or pondering over as much as more ancient examples. Two points need to be made here. It would be a gross deception were I to suggest that one could travel around Oxford, getting one's chauffeur to play the car head-lights over the splendour of cathedral, church, or college walls, as Proust did by the cathedrals of Amiens or

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Rouen in search of the age-old carvings which Ruskin had so lovingly described. Proust admits that he pursued a kind of fetichism "pour accomplir un acte de piété envers Ruskin". He arrived at the point of epiphany and the realisation that a small, weather-worn figure had been resurrected, saved from time, by Ruskin's prose. Nor can one discuss the imagery used in the grotesques and gargoyles to be found in Oxford in any meaningful temporal framework: they cannot be seen as revelatory of some dark corner of the medieval mind, tempting as this may be. At most we are dealing with an imagery of the late Middle Ages, refracted to us through the periodic interventions of those master craftsmen to whom Jude felt so close. To deal in any way historically with gargoyles one must look at those found decorating the internal fabric of a building, where, shielded from the elements, the longevity of freestone carvings is more easily assured. Thus the gargoyles of historical interest, which do indeed tell us a great deal about such matters as the survival of pagan gods and pagan fears, the resilience of folklore, custom and superstition, these are often to be sought in dark nooks and crannies, almost out of sight. Perhaps the oldest in Oxford, though it is hard to be dogmatic in such matters, is the mere palimpsest of a stone, formerly on the facing of St Michael's Church. Discernible on this weather-worn block through a pebble-dash haze, is a reminiscence of a Celtic fertility goddess — the sort of image which along with other assorted hags, demons and supernatural fauna, prompted St Bernard of Clairvaux to ask in the 12th century: "What are these fantastic monsters doing in the cloisters under the eyes of the brothers as they read ? What is the meaning of these unclean monkeys, these savage lions, and monstrous creatures ?. . . Surely, if we do not blush for such absurdities, we should at least regret what we have spent on them."

Bearing in mind, then, that we are dealing neither with objects which squat and deteriorate until they become some key to the memory — some prompt to a writer like Proust — nor with artefacts of the Middle Ages in any real sense of the word, what are we left with ? At a conservative estimate, some several hundred effigies, spanning the average life of freestone, that is to say some two hundred years.

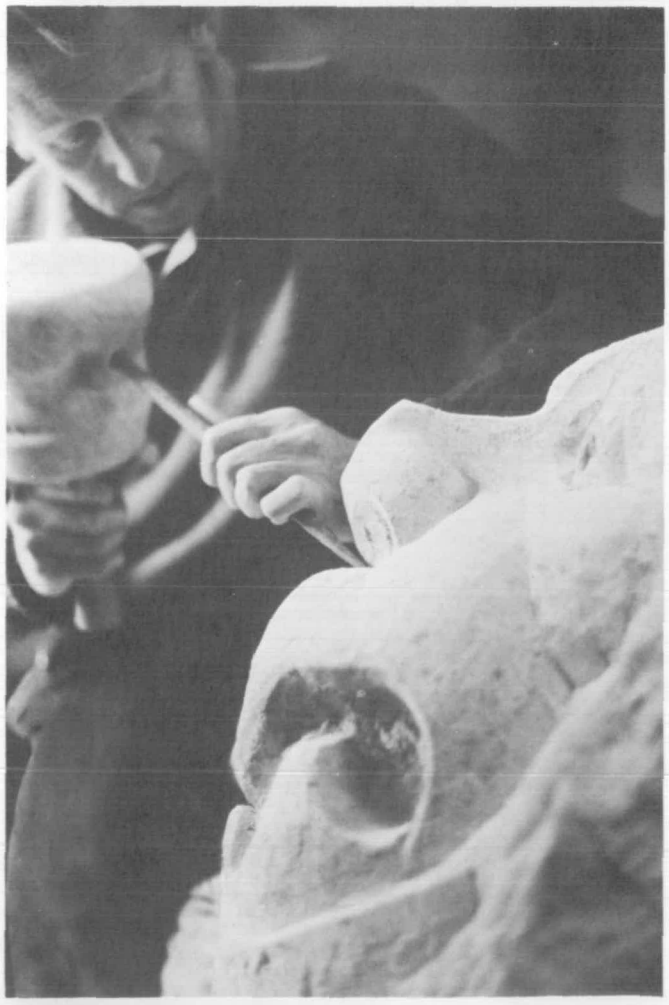
Oxford was indeed blessed with strata of long-lasting oolitic limestone in the vicinity. The oldest stone to be found in the city is the Coral-rag random rubble, used in the building of St Mary at the North Gate and in the city walls. Quarries at Wheatley and Headington provided both hard and freestone for the old educational foundations of Oxford. Stone from Wheatley was used in the initial building programmes in Merton and New College, before similar Wheatley stone was shipped down the Thames for the building of Windsor Castle. Work on the bell tower of New College (1396) and Merton (1448) used stone from Headington. By the end of the eighteenth century however, it was realised how badly freestone weathered, and in the vast programmes of conservation and renovation of more recent times stone has come from further afield.

The masons who work the stone remain for the most part locally based craftsmen. One such is Mr Percy Quick who works as a carver for Axtell, Perry Symm Masonry Ltd and is presently engaged on the renovation of the large gargoyles of Christ Church's Wolsey Tower. Mr Quick is modestly self-effacing about his talents, pointing out that the real skill in stone-masonry is still to be found in hand-worked mouldings, good and true, more prosaic but more exacting than his own freehand work. It is hard to agree with him, standing by the waist-high gargoyle blocks in the yard at Osney, with their vivid and freshly gouged features, or as he works quickly with the small compressed-air drill on friable, and therefore taxing, Rutland stone. A combination of technology, personal inventiveness and skill serves to retain the essence of imagery whilst inescapably creating variations of detail. The residue of a tradition is probably still stored in the mind, and more in the hands, of the stone-mason, aided and abetted by photography and the growing care for preservation characteristic of our age. After detailed measurement and work on the drawing-board connected with the rest of the refacing scheme, Mr Quick then works from a photograph generally taken at a time when the state of the gargoyle's stone was growing leprous. The picture often shows a seemingly featureless block which acts as a kind of 'identikit' photograph, allowing the mason to build up a large cartoon which he then transfers to the block for roughing out. When each gargoyle is nearing completion, Mr Quick guards against a high finish: he ensures that the texture of his chiselling makes for an active surface which will catch the movement of light and shadow as the stone gradually weathers and loses its fresh-hewn quality.

An inventory of forms and meanings would probably demand someone with the talents of a Levi-Strauss, having gained his experience doing fieldwork on masks of some South American tribe.

A Gargoyle on Wolsey Tower, Christ Church.

Mr. Quick's sketch reconstruction. [Original cartoon 14" x 14"].



Working on the Gargoyle. The Clipsham block slowly takes shape, after the initial roughing-out. The whole job takes about ten days.

At the same time he would have to steep himself in 'Totem and Taboo', and procure a large card-index and some hard-wearing shoe-leather, but it would be a task full of constant delights. Here can be noted only what cursorily took my fancy.

For example, could it be that Darwin and his ideas were in the air when the stone-mason who carved the free-standing grotesques in the cloister further into Magdalen College, went to work? You can make your own voyage of the Beagle around this stony Darwinian hinterland, where evolution shows the mark of a special genetic chisel on species long extinct, if ever they existed: griffins and various other good-humoured prehistoric jungle-book creatures. They rear above a rather tame forest of clematis, whilst a starling chatters a would-be tropical accompaniment. A winged creature with scaly feathers preens itself, while other beasts paw the air. Certainly the stuff that dreams were made of for Freud is manifest here too, in the pygmies of this jungle. A corner figure distends his navel into an obscene grimace, whilst, along the row, Egyptian and hieratic, is a weird dinosaur, sprouting a species of sphinx. A hand of the figure edges toward the statue's erogenous zones, whilst the inevitable cat lies nestled by the thigh. Some of the natives are fighting, but not to Queensberry Rules. Their martial art is constricted by the narrow band of cloth each holds around the other's neck: combat at unenviably close-quarters. The other gargoyles on the walls of the cloisters or ranged on the chapel coursing grimace indifferently at the tribe and fauna below, perhaps even puzzled themselves. However, gargoyles are gregarious, perforce tolerant of their neighbours — there are few 'loners'. Most, however contrasted from one to the next, prefer company, seeming to shun certain colleges.

In Christ Church they must be carefully stalked — a rare species which when found may resemble Lewis Carroll's Jumbly or Snark. Carroll, a Christ Church cleric, may perhaps have peopled the Alice tales with figures in certain instances closely akin to gargoyles. But if they ever were to be found in great numbers in Christ Church, some queen or king must long ago have decreed "off with their heads", leaving only a pair — would it be Tweedledum and Tweedledee — fat and bawling, on the side of the Dining Hall. Quads in St John's or Corpus show the more normal jostling sociability of gargoyles in splendid and diverting gatherings, whilst down Queen's Lane at the back of New College, we find a veritable rogues' gallery, a version in gargoyles of the painter Lebrun's theories and practice of depicting the passions. Here they seem to squirm with pique: one shows wicked hilarity whilst another is sunk in sullen despair. A third shows evil anger, whilst grief is channelled in furrows of stone in yet another. The cynical sneer of the know-all contrasts with the more jovial grin of a well-fed Friar Tuck.

Most gargoyles are out of work. Few perform the function they originally assumed in the twelfth century, providing a decorative solution to the drainage of roofs. Most now lie along the coursing of buildings as ornaments, but their function is

recalled in certain instances. Beside the present entrance to Magdalen there is an old gateway on which squats a beast sucking on the short Churchillian stub of a drain-pipe-cum-cigar; similarly in the primeval cloister described above lurk two small effigies with what, fancifully, we might take for blow-pipes, whilst on the gargoyle-festooned church of St Mary the Virgin they are to be found blowing their own trumpet, or rather a leaden cornemuse. Elsewhere, we find rather absurd and superfluous arrangements; from the gaping mouth of a gargoyle there spouts square lead piping of recent date, down to the ground and the gutter.

In rare instances, it is possible to find gargoyles in place along projecting corbel-tables on the exterior of a building. At the base of the spire of St Mary the Virgin, the corbel is fashioned in the ingenious form of a snapping crocodile-like reptile.

But by far the most monumental and impressive are the effigies to be found as projections of the corbels supporting Merton choir, itself forming the magnificent galleon for these figure-heads. The arrangement amply demonstrates a building development of the latter part of the fourteenth-century. This involved the construction of a thin parapet resting partly on the wall and partly upon a corbel-table of grotesques. Into the parapet was let a deep gutter lined with lead to channel the water to the projecting spouts of stone. These are best viewed from immediately below. They include a beatific figure with a small creature nestling bush-baby-shy in his arms; a sword swallower, crying havoc and a tooth-ache giant, with a viper snaking up his torso reaching his cheek, where the forked-tongue flicks venomously. This particular figure recalls very strongly the permanence of the folk-belief in giants, both gentle and wicked. Further on, a friendly-looking oaf clutches over his head a figure escaped from Fuseli's nightmare-world. Another figure repeats this disturbing design, seeking to cram his other self back under his pate, whilst this second head wilfully attempts to tear itself free. Finally, the last corbel has a lamenting woman looking on at some awesome deposition, bringing our eyes back down to the ground and the weathered grave-stones sinking beneath the clipped turf.

This brief survey encompasses but a fraction of these droll and devilish forms. Many more are to be found by looking carefully. They are there when you look, and they will be looking when you are not there.

Working Drawing by Mr Percy Quick. [Original size 17" x 14"].